After the Great Tsunami
ON BEAUTY AND THE THERAPEUTIC INSTITUTION

The subject here is “beauty”—not what it is but what it does—its rhetorical function in our discourse with images. Secondarily, the subject is how, in the final two-thirds of this century, we have come to do without it, and how we have done without it by reassigning its traditional function to a loose confederation of museums, universities, bureaus, foundations, publications, and endowments. I characterize this cloud of bureaucracies generally as the “therapeutic institution”—although other names might do. One might call it an “academy,” I suppose, except that it upholds no standards and proposes no secular agenda beyond its own soothing assurance that the “experience of art” under its politically correct auspices will be redemptive—an assurance founded upon an even deeper faith in “picture-watching” as a form of grace that, by its very “nature,” is good for both our spiritual health and our personal growth—regardless and in spite of the panoply of incommensurable goods and evils that individual works might egregiously recommend.

It goes without saying, I suppose, that this therapeutic institution is a peculiarly twentieth-century artifact, but to understand just how peculiar, we need to ask ourselves: What other century since the Dark Ages could sustain an institution mandated to kidnap an entire province of ongoing artistic endeavor from its purportedly dysfunctional parent culture?—with the purported intention of “rescuing” that endeavor from the political
and mercantile depredations that produced it? None, I would suggest. And yet, after centuries of bureaucrats employing images to validate, essentialize, and detoxify institutions—to glorify their battles, celebrate their kings, and publicize their doctrines—we have, at last, in this century, an institution to validate, essentialize, and detoxify our images—to glorify their battles, celebrate their kings, and publicize their doctrines—and, of course, to neutralize their power. It should come as no surprise, then, that this therapeutic institution came into being in the aftermath of the greatest flowering of unruly images in the history of man, at the conclusion of the longest sustained period since the Renaissance during which institutional and pedagogical control over the arts could be considered nominal at best.

As we know, these gaudy, speculative images were borne forth like blossoms on a great tsunami of doubt and spiritual confusion that swept majestically through the late nineteenth century, cresting into the twentieth and almost immediately exploding across Europe in a conflagration of wars and revolutions. By the nineteen twenties, however, answers were available again, and assurances against doubt and confusion, and there were men in power to embody them. So, quite sensibly, these new ideological elites began to reassert control. In the Soviet Union, Stalin’s cultural commissars began legislating the absolute subordination of form to content in the name of the proletariat. In the United States, Alfred Barr, in the service of inherited capital, proclaimed the absolute subordination of content to form; while in Germany, in the name of the Nazi bourgeoisie, Reichsminister Joseph Goebbels, the brightest and wickedest of them all, was orchestrating their perfect match. Different agendas to be sure, but almost simultaneously, each of these three putsche consolidate and activated the powers of patronage to neutralize the rhetorical force of contemporary images—to minimize the slippage, as it were, between how it looks and what it means, because, as long as nothing but “the beautiful” is rendered “beautifully,” there is no friction—and things do not change.

The preemptive Fascist appropriation of Futurist rhetoric in Italy, of course, was a different political animal altogether, although it speaks to the same slippery issue of private rhetoric and public power. As it turned out, Mussolini’s coup would not meet its match until the early nineteen sixties when Ivy League Cold Warriors in Washington coopted the cultural chauvinism of Abstract Expressionism, mounting touring exhibitions that effectively converted Pollock’s canvases into muscular, metaphorical billboards for a virile, imperial, “all-over” America.

Today, naturally, the rhetorical nature of the discourse is hardly debatable. If we accept the contemporary axiom that the meaning of a sign is, indeed, the response to it, then there is every reason to regard works of art as rhetorical instruments rather than philosophical entities—or essential copies. Further, in a legalistic culture like our own—in which the status of the image has been problematic since Moses came down the mountain, and all great visual artifacts from the Sistine Chapel to Blue Poles are occasions for dispute rather than consent—a certain amount of inverse variability between how it looks and what it means is, I think, taken for granted. Under the waning aegis of the therapeutic institution, however, the consequences of this slippage remain unexamined.

Freud, in fact, puts his finger on this inverse variable between how it looks and what it means in his essay “Creative Writers and Daydreaming.” Here, Freud characterizes the artist’s task as the covert fulfillment of socially unacceptable infantile wishes in which we acquiesce on account of “the purely formal—that is, the aesthetic—yield of pleasure which he [the artist] offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. We give the name of
incentive bonus, or forepleasure, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources." Freud, of course, by characterizing our "normal" pleasure as "pure," presumes that the rhetorical aspects of a work's presentation are somehow distinguishable from its more radical content, and further, that they somehow mitigate it. I would suggest that, far from ameliorating the artist's radical, infantile wishes, the rhetoric of beauty politicizes them, makes them publicly available, and proposes them in fact as social options. Further, I would suggest that Reichsminister Goebbels understood this, as did Alfred Barr, and Stalin—and that none of them was particularly sanguine at the prospect.

This is not to say, of course, that art is just advertising, only that art, outside the institutional vitrine of therapeutic mystery, is never not advertising and never apolitical. Commodity advertising and pornography only define the limiting conditions of art's project, its objective and somatic extremes, but they participate, just like the real thing, in that accumulated shifting, protean collection of tropes and figures that comprise "the rhetoric of beauty." And in fact, since these marginal endeavors exist outside the purchase of the therapeutic institution, they continue to employ that powerful rhetoric to sell soap and sex, constructing images in which the figures of beauty function as they always have in the visual discourse of European culture. First, they enfranchise the beholder by exhibiting markers that designate a territory of shared values, thus empowering the beholder to respond. Second, they valorize the content of the image, which, presuming its litigious or neurotic intent, is in need of valorization.

The unfashionable implication of this characterization is that rhetorical beauty, as we are considering it, is largely a quantitative concept. It proposes to enfranchise numbers of individuals. However, since the rhetoric can, on occasion, perform
one of its functions more efficiently than the other, some distinctions can be made. We can, for instance, distinguish between the “most beautiful image” that simply enfranchises the most people, and the “most effective beautiful image” that valorizes the most preposterous (oops, problematic) content to the most people for the longest time. Raphael’s _Madonna of the Chair_ would qualify here, for its having exquisitely valorized the “itty” doctrines of the incarnate word and the virgin birth to generations of Catholics worldwide who should have known better.

Further, we might say that the “most efficient beautiful image” is that which valorizes the most egregious content to the wealthiest, most powerful and influential beholders exclusively; and in this category, I think we must acknowledge Picasso’s _Les Demoiselles d’Avignon_—a painting that we must regard either as a magnificent “formal breakthrough” (whatever that is) or, more realistically, as a manifestation of Picasso’s dazzling insight into the shifting values of his target market. I mean this seriously. Consider this scenario: Pablo comes to Paris, for all intents and purposes, a bumpkin, complete with a provincial and profoundly nineteenth-century concept of the cultural elite and its proclivities—still imagining that the rich and silly prefer to celebrate their privilege and indolence by “aestheticizing” their immediate environment into this fine-tuned, fibrillating, pastel atmosphere. He proceeds to paint his Blue and Rose period pictures under this misapprehension (pastel clowns, indeed!)—then Leo and Gertrude introduce him to a faster crowd.

He meets some rich and careless Americans and, gradually, being no dummy, perceives, among the cultural elite with whom he is hanging out and perilously hanging on, a phase-shift in their parameters of self-definition. These folks are no longer building gazebos and situating symboliste Madonnas in fern-choked grottos. They are running with the bulls—something that Pablo can understand—and measuring their power and security by their ability to tolerate high-velocity temporal change, high levels of symbolic distortion, and maximum psychic discontinuity. They are _Americans_, in other words, post-Jamesian Americans, in search of no symbolic repose, unbeguiled by haystacks, glowing peasants, or Ladies of Shallot. So Pablo Picasso—neither the first nor the last artist whom rapacious careerism will endow with acute cultural sensitivity—goes for the gold, encapsulates an age, and, through no fault of his own, finally creates the cornerstone of the first great therapeutic institution.

I have no wish to diminish Picasso’s achievement by this insouciant characterization of it, but I do want to emphasize the fact that, at this time, pictures were made primarily for people, not against them—and to suggest that if we examine the multiplication of styles from roughly 1850 to 1920, we will find, for each one of them, a coterie of beholders, an audience already in place. Thus, a veritable bouquet of styles, of “beauties,” were invented, and none of them died, nor have they ever. An audience persists for all of them; and, if I seem to have splintered the idea of beauty out of existence by projecting it into this proliferation of “beauties,” well, that is more or less my point.

For nearly 70 years, during the adolescence of modernity, professors, curators, and academicians could only wring their hands and weep at the spectacle of an exploding culture in the sway of painters, dealers, critics, shopkeepers, second sons, Russian epicures, Spanish parvenues, and American expatriates. Jews abounded, as did homosexuals, bisexuals, Bolsheviks, and women in sensible shoes. Vulgar people in manufactur and trade who knew naught but romance and real estate bought sticky Impressionist landscapes and swooning Pre-Raphaelite bimbos from guys with monocles who, in their spare time, were shipping the treasures of European civilization across the Atlantic to railroad barons. And most disturbingly for those who felt they ought to be in control—or that someone should be—“beauties” proliferated, each finding an audience, each bearing its own little rhetorical load of psycho-political permission.
It is no wonder, then, that the cultural elites in Europe and America would take the occasion of the Great Depression—while all those vulgar folks in trade were so ignominiously starving—to reassert their control over a secular culture run rampant. They did so blandly in Paris and Bloomsbury, violently in Moscow and Berlin, and ever so elegantly in New York, where a brilliant young gentleman managed to parlay his tandem passions for contemplating little brown pictures and dining with rich old women into a Museum of Modern Art. It was an historic moment, a watershed, to say the least, so it is not surprising, perhaps, that a great deal of the art that Alfred H. Barr Jr. appropriated from the rich, Reichsminister für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda Joseph Goebbels found inappropriate for the Volks—a fact which should pique our suspicion as to whether Barr's institutionalization of this work doesn't betray his own elitist reservations about the appropriateness of these images, in unredeemed condition, for the Volks. At any rate, both Barr and Goebbels, having acquired institutional power, proceeded with roughly parallel agendas—both of them clearly operating out of an understanding that works of art, left to their own audiences, have the potential to destabilize the status quo.

Barr, operating from the premise that art can be good for us, selected the art that he considered “best” for us, and emphasized by text and juxtaposition those aspects of the art he thought signified their quality. So, if one had attended Barr’s opening exhibition of works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh, it would have been clear that Barr was hypostasizing their rhetorical aspects into “formal values,” and recommending these artists to us for their rather narrow area of regional and technical convergence, while suppressing their equally self-evident and candidly disparate social, political, and philosophical agendas.

Goebbels, on the other hand, selected the art that he considered “worst” for us to exhibit in Entartete Kunst. He then emphasized, by text and juxtaposition, those aspects that he thought signified their degeneracy. These turned out to be a lot of the same qualities that Alfred Barr thought signified quality, but not to worry; one curator reifies the rhetorical aspects of the work, another vilifies them. As long as institutional control is reasserted and the rhetorical aspects of beauty are neutralized, what’s the difference? Well, obviously, our relationship to images is different. Our relationship to images authorized by beauty is now distinct from our relationship to images authorized by the therapeutic institution, and radically so. And this is no less the case when a single image undergoes a shift of authorization, as anyone who has loaned work to a museum exhibition can tell you. Visiting that work can be like visiting an old friend in prison. It is a distinctly different image, hanging among a population of kindred offenders, bereft of its eccentricity and public franchise, yet somehow, on account of that loss, newly invested with a faintly ominous kind of parochial power. To suggest the nature of this distinction, I would like to draw some analogies between these relationships and those discussed by Gilles Deleuze in his essay of 1967, “Coldness and Cruelty.”

In this essay, Deleuze seeks to unpack the portmanteau concept of sadomasochism, and to dissolve the presumed reciprocity that Freud infers between sadism and masochism; and, if one is willing to accept Sade and Masoch as exemplars of the idioms that bear their names, he does so quite successfully—returning to their texts and elegantly delineating their contrasting content. Most crucially, Deleuze argues that, although both Sade's and Masoch's narratives portray persecutors and victims, and both exploit the sexual nexus of pleasure and pain, there is no reason to contrapose them. Similar narratives do not necessarily tell similar stories, nor versions of the same story. In narratives of desire, it matters whose story it is, who writes the script and who describes the scene—who deter-
mines whose fate and who controls the outcome. When these factors are taken into account, the dramas of Sade and Masoch diverge into different dimensions, generating distinct and profoundly dissonant environments.

Masoch tells the victim's story and only his. In Masoch, it is the victim who recruits the cast, describes the scene, and scripts the action. And, ultimately, by negotiating the conditions of his own servitude and “educating” his persecutor, Masoch's victim dominates the scene of his submission and derives from it a yield of pleasure. Sade, on the other hand, tells the master's story, always, and his script is presumed to have the philosophical force of reason, the authority of nature. Sade's masters ruthlessly impose the logic of their natural philosophy upon unwilling victims, alternately “instructing” them in its rigor and scientifically describing for us its technical application.

As a consequence, the mechanisms of these two narratives depart at every point. The sadist has no insight into masochism, nor any need of a masochist. He requires an unwilling victim whom he can degrade and “instruct.” Likewise, the masochist has no need, nor any understanding, of the sadist. He requires a willing mistress whom he can elevate and “educate.” Sadism is about the autonomous act. (Sade narrates actions.) Masochism is about theatrical suspense. (Masoch “freezes the scene!”) Sadism is about nature and power. Masochism is about culture and, ironically, the law. Finally, sadism deals with the imposition of “formal values” and the cruel affirmation of “natural law,” and masochism focuses on deferred sublimity and the vertiginous rhetoric of trust. As a consequence, Deleuze notes, “the sadist is in need of institutions,” and “the masochist of contractual relations.”

The analogy I wish to draw here is blatant. The rhetoric of beauty tells the story of the beholder who, like Masoch's victim, contracts his own submission—having established, by free consent, a reciprocal, contractual alliance with the image. The signature of this contract, of course, is beauty. On the one hand, its rhetoric enfranchises the beholder; on the other hand, it seductively proposes a content that is, hopefully, outrageous and possible. In any case, this vertiginous bond of trust between the image and the beholder is private, voluntary, a little scary, and since the experience is not presumed to be an end in itself, it might, ultimately, have some consequence.

The experience of art within the therapeutic institution, however, is presumed to be an end in itself. Under its auspices, we play a minor role in the master's narrative—the artist's tale—and celebrate his autonomous acts even as we are off-handedly victimized by their philosophical force and ruthless authority. Like princes within the domain of the institution, or jailhouse mafiosi, such works have no need of effeminate appeal. And we, poor beholders, like the silly demimondaines in Sade's Philosophy of the Bedroom, are presumed to have just wandered in, looking for a kiss, so Paws! Whatever we get, we deserve—and what we get most prominently is ignored, disenfranchised and instructed. Then told that it is “good” for us.

Thus has the traditional, contractual alliance between the image and its beholder (of which beauty is the signature, and in which there is no presumption of received virtue) been supplanted by an hierarchical one between Art, presumed virtuous, and a beholder presumed to be in need of it. This is the signature of the therapeutic institution. And although such an institution, as Barr conceived it, is scarcely imaginable under present conditions, it persists anyway and even flourishes—usually in its original form, but occasionally under the administration of right-thinking creatures who presume to have cleansed its instrumentality with the heat of their own righteous anger and to be using its authority (as the Incredible Hulk used to say) as a “force of good.”

This is comic-book thinking. Nothing redeems but beauty, its generous permission, its gorgeous celebration of all
that has previously been uncelebrated. And if we entertain, even for a moment, the slightest presumption that an institution, suddenly and demonstrably bereft of its social and philosophical underpinning, is liable to imminent collapse, we have committed what George Bernard Shaw considered the most suicidal error that a citizen can. As Shaw pointed out, institutions collapse from lack of funding, they do not die from lack of meaning. \textit{We} die from lack of meaning.